

# PERFORMANCE ART IN IRELAND: A HISTORY

EDITED BY ÁINE PHILLIPS



**From *Performance Art in Ireland*, chapter on *Performing Political Acts: Performance Art In Northern Ireland: Ritual, Catharsis, and Transformation*  
by André Stitt.**

Ritual elements have also been used as structural devices and intrinsic references in the work of the artists John Carson and Nick Stewart relative to the social, cultural, and political environment of Northern Ireland. Indeed one can identify codes, signifiers, and materials used in performance art from Northern Ireland as a reflection of the dominant ritual activities carried out within the sectarian divisions: for example violent and repetitive behaviour, the use of meat associated with viscera, petrol, burning, the use of coloured ribbons, clothing, hats, flags, walking sticks, batons, music, paramilitary garments and associated implements. The demographic and environmental influence on performance art of collective, social, communal, and cultural ritual particular to Northern Ireland exerted a central role by means of their political and religious demonstrations and affirmations. John Carson whose performance *Men of Ireland/The Men in Me* most clearly illustrates this in his use of cultural stereotypes. He emphasises this when he says:

The work directly referred to the religious rituals, and the rituals and symbols employed and paraded by Catholic/Republican and Protestant/Loyalist communities, to preserve and assert their sense of identity. Additionally it referred to codified behaviours and repeated actions, which lead to the formation of stereotypes.<sup>22</sup>

His performance at A.R.E. in Belfast in 1980 consisted of the artist enacting nine different cameos with a total duration (including changeovers) of approximately four hours. Set against a seventies backdrop of civil unrest, economic and industrial decline, and a British government struggling to come to terms with the legacy of its colonial control over Northern Ireland *Men of Ireland/The Men In Me* was a performance that examined Irish male stereotypes. Each time suitably attired as a different Irish character stereotype Carson enacted a 20 minute routine surrounded by a circle of life-size wooden 'cut-outs' of all nine characters with each action accompanied by a recorded sound track of appropriate popular songs.

The first character in the arena was the worker, who set the scene by painting a map of Ireland inside the circle formed by the nine cut-out

figures. The four sections of the map corresponded to the four provinces of Ulster, Munster, Leinster, and Connaught. Ulster was painted orange and the other three provinces were painted green.

Next 'The Clergyman' symbolized the religious indoctrination, which determined and defined Northern Ireland's two principal communities. The 'Orangeman' then marched in to assert the Protestant/Loyalist ascendancy. 'The Youth' danced violently over the painted map, irreverently messing up and mixing up the orange and the green. 'The Romantic' represented the artist/poet/philosopher trying to rise above the malaise of bigotry, hatred and violence that was prevalent at the time.

The shillelagh wielding, dancing 'Paddy Irishman' happily reinforced the clichéd stereotype of cod Irishness. The masked 'Paramilitary' figure referred to terrorists on both sides of the sectarian divide, who were holding the country to ransom back in the seventies. The businessman was indifferent to the mutual destructiveness of both communities, as long as it did not significantly affect his commercial or economic interests. Last in the arena was 'The Drunk', finding solace along a drink-fuelled road to oblivion. For Carson 'the work was cathartic, in that it helped me recognize and begin to come to terms with conflicting aspects of my own upbringing, and personal and national identity. [...] It was a form of memorializing how extreme and frightening the situation in Northern Ireland was in the seventies.'<sup>23</sup>

Although Carson's performance is more clearly defined, unambiguous and inclusive in terms of Irish cultural references, the use of ritual and repetition has its origins in the Protestant culture that both John Carson and I grew up in. This was exemplified in Loyalist iconography and demonstrations. However, in terms of ritual behaviour in general it would be true to say that a binary identification occurs referring to both sides of the political and religious divide when considering Northern Irish culture and identity as a whole.

There were: religious, quasi-religious, paramilitary orders, and sectarian groupings; the Church, Catholic/Nationalist, Protestant/Loyalist, all developed their own rituals to confer identity. These 'orders' and 'paragroups' integrated religion with politics with social and cultural ideology through ritual to establish dependency. Ritual was ubiquitous, and used to affirm righteous power and control by being a conduit for dominant ideologies.<sup>24</sup>

In Carson's work the cultural cliché reinforces a subjugation of identity to its basic coded denominator. What Rona M. Fields in her banned 1976 study, *Society Under Siege: A Psychology of Northern Ireland*, has termed a form of 'psychological genocide', a control methodology employed by dominant colonial concerns.<sup>25</sup> Fields states that '[psychological genocide] is the mandated destruction of a group with the explicit outcome of eradicating its symbolic power and its capacity for perpetuating its own identity.'<sup>26</sup> The nature of this condition effected both sides and created a position of dependence with a binary whereby both sides become victim. This is also problematic as the nature of ritual in Northern Ireland then becomes a way of asserting communal identity whilst simultaneously victimising the perpetuation of identity through cultural stereotype.

From *Performance Art in Ireland*, chapter on *Out Of Ireland: Irish Performance Art Internationally*  
by Áine Phillips

## JOHN CARSON

John Carson left Belfast to study for an MFA in California Institute of the Arts, in 1981, and returned to the UK for 23 years before moving to Pittsburgh as Head of the School of Art, Carnegie Mellon University in 2006. A colleague of Stitt's, Carson created an emotionally intense, often humorous series of performances responding to his fractured experience of Irish identity. His singularity is 'an imagination played out in the enormous shadow of memory' as described by Mic Moroney in *0044 Irish Artists in Britain*.<sup>10</sup> Carson's early work examined Irish identity, as Andre Stitt outlines in his chapter earlier in this book. At CalArts Carson examined the influence of the USA on the Irish psyche in his work *American Medley* where he travelled to 50 iconic American locations made famous in song, sending postcards back home as documentation. He subsequently turned this process-based project into a staged performance where he sang his way across the States in 11 minutes. In 1983 he presented *American Medley* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London where his Belfast art colleague and fellow artist Declan McGonagle was then director. Much of Carson's performance based work uses singing where he pits his amateur voice, untrained but expressive and passionate, alongside trained musicians; using interpretations of well known pop and rock and folk songs as propellers to examine cultural preconceptions about the Irishman abroad.

In *Off Pat* made in 1985-87, Carson merged his disconnected collections of stories and images into a live performance using a newscaster format. He juxtaposed sometimes grim and tragic stories with ridiculous images, which were projected in slide format behind his formally seated presence. He explains:

the images and stories contradict each other, overturning expectations and cultural prejudices. For example I tell one story where the Irishman seems to be the butt of the joke then flip it so the Englishman is the fall guy.<sup>11</sup>

This performance toured the UK, USA, and Australia.

In the 1990s he found that his storytelling performances lent themselves to video and his work was commissioned by the Arts Council of England and BBC 2 for television, consequently reaching wide audiences. He continues to acknowledge the influence of CalArts as being crucial to his development as an artist by opening up his world into a wide network of artists and venues and by providing rigorous critical context. At CalArts he 'was challenged to retain a sense of proportion, but Belfast was always [his] reality gauge.'<sup>12</sup> His formative years in Belfast located his practice firmly in issues of identity, while working and living abroad secured that rooted interest and broadened it into the examination of cultural complexity, cultural mix, and displacement.

### John Carson's Performance Art Tips

Ask yourself why are you doing a live performance.

Remember that there is an audience.

Do you really need an audience – what's in it for them?

Don't be nervous, it can only go wrong.

Don't worry if you make a mistake, you are the only one who knows the script.

Don't be afraid of silence, use it.

You have the floor.

Understand the special contract between you and the audience.

Know whether you are after truth or effect.

Use any device to achieve the effect you want.

Don't disregard the lessons and techniques of theatre.

Recognize the place of laughter.

Be prepared but be prepared to improvise.

If you want to be sure it's going to work and happen on time, try it out beforehand.

Allow for the unpredictable.

People do not always do what you want or what you expect.

If you are going to be cruel, make sure it's on purpose.<sup>13</sup>